Sweating Your Way to Success

By PETER ORSZAG

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The most important book I've read over the past six months is Matthew Syed's "Bounce." Teddy Roosevelt once said that "in this life we get nothing save by effort." Syed shows how trenchant Roosevelt was.

Syed is a two-time Olympian in table tennis. His book is impressive for two reasons. First, he takes empirical evidence on the science of success seriously (and in the areas where I know the literature to some degree, his depiction is quite accurate). Second, he shows how that evidence shatters widespread myths about what leads to better performance in any complex undertaking (including, for example, chess, tennis and math).

Basically, we've bought into several misconceptions about excellence, which are not only wrong but affirmatively counterproductive.

Let me focus today on the core one. Too many of us believe in the "talent" myth — that top performers are born, rather than built. But Syed shows that in almost every arena in which tasks are complex, top performers excel not because of innate ability but because of dedicated practice.

In effect, the stars among us have practiced so much that they are better at what psychologists call "chunking." Imagine trying to remember 41 letters or numbers. Most of us couldn't come close to doing that. Now imagine trying to remember a sentence with 47 letters or numbers, like: "Imagine trying to remember 41 letters or numbers." Most of us can do that with little difficulty, because we are chunking the letters and numbers. We remember the words, and we know the letters in each word.

Syed shows that most better performers have practiced so intensely that they chunk better at their tasks than normal people. So we see impressive performance and think

someone is naturally skilled, whereas the reality is that person has simply practiced for longer and more intensely than others.

Perhaps the most dramatic example is from chess. A 1973 study took one group of chess masters and another group of novices. When presented with chess pieces as they would be arranged in a chess game, the masters were stunningly better than the novices at recalling each piece's position.

But here's the catch: when the pieces were set up randomly, in a manner that would never occur in a real game of chess, the masters were no better than novices at remembering where the pieces were. So much for chess masters being born with special powers of memory or concentration. Instead, the explanation is that they've played so many games of chess that they are more adept at recognizing patterns on the chess board (at least, when those patterns could arise in a game of chess).

Success in most arenas of life is thus not a reflection of innate skill but rather devoted effort. And Syed demonstrates why it is not just effort, but purposeful effort that is key — if you're going to get better at chunking, you can't just go through the motions and punch time on the clock. You need to put your heart into it. More on that later this week.